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## Tragedy in Modernity\*

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**Abstract.**

A barbarian, primitive, bloodthirsty, in short, non-rational unknown currently fouls our air. Its presence leads us to reflect upon the fact that a thing may be true, without being, however, good, beautiful or fair. As a perverse compensation for the "intimate terror" of a city that has bowed down to the ghost of social asepsis, and also as a perverse compensation for the lethal boredom in which that same city agonises, a latent insurrection takes place in it: terrorism, all kinds of tribal wars, archaic beliefs, and fundamentalisms of many sources and loyalties. I believe that civic absenteeism, everyday sedition and terrorist escalation are all part of the same disastrous eroticism, a kind of allergic reaction of an impoverished and uprooted social body, given over to the abyss of total bartering in a flat, immaterial world.

**Tragedy in Modernity****1.Zero tolerance and zero risk**

The ghost of social asepsis currently haunts our modernity. Hence the campaigns of "zero tolerance" regarding alcohol, drugs, urban and suburban banditry. Hence local actions for eradicating slums, and national actions for banishing poverty. Hence global mobilisations for eradicating terrorism. This is the ghost of social asepsis lulling us to sleep with the reverie of "zero risk": full safety and comfort, on the road, in town and country, in everyday life. "Don't drink and drive". "Just say no to drugs". "More police stations and agents". "Safe sex". "Lasting freedom". All attempts to capture the animal that lives inside every human being, exorcisms to scare away all the shadows (fears and anxieties) that possess the individual and collective body.

Zero tolerance and zero risk are instances of the "intimate terror" (Lyotard, 1993) of a pragmatic and civilised order, an order that dreams about success and closes a condominium so as to leisurely enjoy it. This ghost finds its perfect metaphor in the shopping centre. Orderly, aseptic, opulent, egalitarian, youthful, seductive city, reverberating with lights, free from undesirable people, the shopping centre accomplishes our modernity as both technological rationality and aesthetical experience – reason and emotion, the two major stylisations of modernity, go here hand in hand (Miranda, 1994; Martins, 2002).

Besides the "intimate terror" that runs through our city, darkening it, our democratic ideal undergoes the ordeal of lethal boredom. It would seem that, since we no longer starve, our world would rejoice in "free freedom", as Rimbaud's verse goes. It was all a mistake: we no longer die of starvation, but we die of tedium instead. Our modern condition does not stomp around in jackboots; neither does it breathe the leaden "pax romana" air. The West, today, does not seem threatened by any bayonet-bristled reason. In no place do we find a call to order, except in the shady realms of Islamic Fundamentalism. There is no call to order in thought, political action, or even in feelings and customs, and that in spite of AIDS and other quite contemporary and quite disturbing problems. The positivism of reason is outlawed, or else seen

as a mistake. For it the bells tirelessly toll, to the point that we may say that António Damásio's *The Error of Descartes* (1994) and Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* (1995) are, in this context, just a few little strokes, a short toll for the passing of reason.

Based on a freely accepted contract, the democratic ideal has permitted the dream of a society ruled in the name of what is good, fair and true. And all we have to do, to pay for this dream of civilised order, made of safety and well-being, is dying of boredom. The same city that exorcises its fears and anxieties in predictable, safe adventures, flogging shadows on the TV and in shopping centres, tediously agonises in a hygienic daily life and sinks in political indifference and absenteeism.

In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin (1992: 28) was already speaking of the "crisis of experience" that contaminated our modernity. He saw it, then, as a catastrophic consequence of the First World War. In our days, Giorgio Agamben writes about our current incapacity of grasping our historical situation. It is this incapacity that "makes our daily life unbearable" (Agamben, 2000: 20). In spite of the fact that it is comforted by a kind of emotional syrup, created by technology and the media, called communicational transparency, which gives it "terror without horror, commotion without emotion, compassion without passion", the city lives today under anaesthesia, lacking "any kind of compromise with the time and notions that motivate it" (Benjamin, 1993: 590), wallowing in a daily life that has been turned by the media into the easy prey of a noisy, ceaseless transcription, that denies its life-threatening qualities.

Sometimes, a bit like Rosa Luxembourg, we still hear about German philosophy, the American dream, French thought and the English point of view. And we also hear that the "spirit" of a given people was, for a time, the trustee and witness of a founding Idea. Lyotard (1993), while remembering the invocation, in Athens, Philadelphia and Paris, of the idea of liberty, just as the idea of imperial peace was invoked in Rome and London, and the idea of a saviour race in Berlin and Tokyo, came to the conclusion that such figures had combative qualities, operating inside conflicts of ideas, mobilising and organising all available forces within a given geographic and demographic area. Then, he added that such figures were the places for weaving and testing the most adequate growth system, the one better fit for the general mobilisation of available forces.

Ernest Junger, while explaining, in 1920, the triumph of the Allied in their war against the German Empire, acknowledged that a community of citizens who saw themselves as free was more ready for "total mobilisation" than the Kaiser's subjects. Today, indeed, fifty years after World War II and twelve after the Cold War, Junger's appreciation could not ring more true. Leaving behind several millennia of attempts and experiences with all kinds of community organisation, neo-liberal democracy emerges as an all-round winner. And this means that "human history was nothing more than the natural selection through competition, precisely

through competition, of the most efficient form of community organisation", concludes Lyotard.

And thus we reach the flat world of total bartering, the world in its present state. The neo-liberal democracy gains its prestige and authority from the fact of being efficient. Consensus comes from this evidence. We give our assent to this democratic, neo-liberal world. French sociologist Maffesoli, while visiting Minho University, strikingly described this frame of mind: "Le monde c'est du caca, il faut vivre avec ça".

## **2. The desertion of the Spirit**

In the flat world of total bartering, nothing escapes consensus, which is just another name for the market; nothing escapes, thus, competition and profit. In other words, nothing escapes success, winning. Not even free actions, be they creations, acts of love or beliefs. Just as money becomes the general equivalent of all merchandise (goods, bodies and souls), opinion becomes the general equivalent of free actions (creations, acts of love or beliefs). Once free actions find themselves submitted to the weakening influence of opinion, they join the frantic race for communicational transparency. Creations, acts of love and beliefs must now be successful, which is to say, they must find audiences, drowning themselves in the flat world of total bartering.

Michel de Certeau (1980: 22-23) sees in this degeneration of the democratic ideal the desertion of the Spirit. He draws a paradoxical, but quite suggestive, parallel between our modern condition and the ancient condition of the Jews in the time of Jerusalem's overthrow by the Babylonians. The city was undergoing the pains of deportation, but those who had been spared saw themselves as an elite, for being able to remain close to the sacred walls. Ezekiel, the prophet, "a skilful weaver of a language of imagination", gives us a "vision" of that desertion of the spirit that, in spite of having a different meaning today, loses nothing of its frightening intensity. The prophet sees the fourfold cherubic chariot of Jahveh's "glory" rise above the Temple and abandon the city (Ezekiel, chaps. 10-12). The spirit had deserted. The architecture of the institutions emptied itself of meaning, leaving to those now occupying them stones, a ground and implements – not the way of possessing the spirit. For Ezekiel, the invisible *raison d'être* of his people had left this earth and taken the way of exile.

Something similar is happening to us, according to Michel de Certeau. Our democratic ideal is undergoing an exile. Our institutions seem abandoned, precisely by those who believe they will ensure truth and justice by the simple fact of occupying them. The support of citizens also goes away. Sometimes protesting noisily. But in general silently, like water seeping through our fingers. The very spirit that animated the representation of our democratic ideal is leaving us. It did not disappear; it has emigrated, away from the democratic structures, leaving them reduced to dispirited spectacles or liturgies of absence. Such is the case of current parliamentary debates and electoral campaigns. Should all the important leaders of political parties and unions

protest, raising their hands to the skies, that they live in a time devoid of virtues, the problem does not lie, according to the prophet's image, in the non-existence of a "spirit". It lies simply in the fact that the spirit has deserted them. There is no lack of spirit; it's they who lack it.

The dissociation between the democratic ideal and those who no longer inhabit it is slowly tearing the fabric of our culture. A kind of collective irrationality fills the institutions with men lacking in spirit – lacking the only thing that would give credibility to their power. When the spirit goes, so goes the support of the citizens. Indifference and absenteeism triumph.

### 3. Politics as a management strategy

As a perverse compensation for the "intimate terror" of a city that has bowed down to the ghost of social asepsis, and also as a perverse compensation for the lethal boredom in which that same city agonises, a latent insurrection takes place in it: terrorism, all kinds of tribal wars, archaic beliefs, and fundamentalisms of many sources and loyalties. A barbarian, primitive, bloodthirsty, in short, non-rational unknown currently fouls our air. Its presence leads us to reflect upon the fact that a thing may be true, without being, however, good, beautiful or fair. This issue occupied Max Weber, in the moment of implantation of modern rational order. But it had already concerned Nietzsche, and, before him, Baudelaire, in his *Fleurs du Mal*. Michel Maffesoli (2000: 166) calls our current and manifold "flowers of evil" the "return of tragedy", accomplishing that "truth" which is neither good, beautiful or fair. Tragedy, taking life in its whole, gathering "shadow and light, generosity and vileness" in itself, would be, in the long run, the foundation of popular culture.

All kinds of imaginative systems, beliefs, religious identities, feelings of belonging to a community and other emotional phenomena contaminate the whole of the social body, while evading the mechanistic, finalistic logic of a social whole dominated by instrumental reason. Rwanda, Zaire, Nigeria, ex-Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Timor Loro Sae, Palestine, Afghanistan – always the same massacres, carnages, suicidal terrors. Facing the irruption of these identity passions and tribal emotions, what can a democratic ideal do? Facing the ancestral myths that feed local and national communities, can the universal values produced by our 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical systems still be of some use?

Hygienised and bored to death, our modernity sees, in the meantime, politics reduced to management strategies and wars reduced to police operations. Indeed, in the eyes of the West, what happens in Afghanistan is nothing else than a clean-up operation, that is to say, something to be managed and run in police terms. See, for instance, the enlightening polemics about the Afghan held as prisoners by the American in the Cuban island of Guantanamo. American diplomacy even said that the Afghan prisoners could not be seen as POWs, with those statutes, dignity and rights recognised by the Geneva Convention. All armed gangs are potentially

subject to police treatment.

I cannot resist quoting now a delightful excerpt from Bragança de Miranda's book *Política e Modernidade*. He is discussing the notion that defines politics as the "free action of many and, desirably, of all" when he feels the need of distancing himself from *Realpolitik*, a politics that is constantly haunted by pragmatic reason. He evokes Shakespeare's *Richard III*, where, in a state of emergency (war, in that instance), all the fixity of attributes and qualities is abolished, and all fighters became equal. The happy few of that time were fighting companions. The happy few of now are those who rule the egotism of positions, of Portuguese dentists versus Brazilian ones, of magistrates versus university professors, of northerners versus southerners, of supporters of Porto football team versus supporters of Benfica, of many Portuguese people versus immigrants from Africa and Eastern Europe, of Catholics versus other religious sects, of those who defend the division of Portugal into self-governing regions and those who are against it. War, which for Shakespeare was the clearest sign of a state of emergency, is now a war... of budgets. The new form of war is, indeed, increasingly a police matter, since our emergency situations tend to limit themselves to conflicts of egotistical interests; in other words, budget distribution. No wonder, then, that politics becomes confused with the "art" of ruling or, in other words, with the art a few have of constantly inspiring the "mysterious obedience" of many, according to La Boétie. This new form of war, which is simply a police matter, since the emergency situation is nothing but a conflict between egotistical interests, is not about vanquishing anyone. It is all a question of forcing our adversary to negotiate its way into the system, according to rules. It has always been like that: see what is happens to Arafat and the Palestinians, to the IRA and the Northern Irish, to ETA and the Basques.

It is true that such a game can always bring about the problem of what possessions miserable people may have to negotiate. I am thinking about Third World countries. Pascal was, however, quite right when he ironically wrote: "no-one dies so poor they are unable to leave something behind" (*apud* Benjamin, 1992: 45). Such is, indeed, the case with poor countries. By leaving their debt behind them, they can always negotiate their further indebtedness.

Cold, calculating, dispassionate, insensitive to warmth, in spite of being constantly overheated and remotely controlled by a kind of emotional syrup, created by technology and the media, politics is thus nothing but management strategy and police actions. In the meantime, preparing the desertion of the spirit, a flat, immaterial world, flattened by the spreading pragmatic reason that weakens us, keeps on gaining social terrain.

#### **4. The Media and pragmatic reason**

It is true that the pragmatic reason which makes up the market and the consensus has no room for peace. But it ensures safety and growth through competition, and that is enough for it. Competition is pragmatic reason's only resource. The nature of this flat, immaterial world, the

world of total bartering, allows for revision, but does not tolerate subversion. Radicalism is increasingly becoming an anachronism there, and so is any kind of inconformity. In politics, alternation is a rule, but there can be no alternative. Just look at Kyoto's Environment Summit, which took place about four years ago. Let us not subvert the system's logic of safety and development, in other words: let us not subvert the system of industrial production currently poisoning the planet, let us not subvert the global logic of hegemonic capitalism. Revision, morality, humanism, that is okay. But let us not have any talk of alternatives, subverting the system's logic, or changing our way of life. Hence our joy, in Kyoto, for having reduced in 6 to 8 percent our ration of poison. I believe this world, this flat, immaterial world, this world of total bartering, is not simply favoured by the media, as it is usually said. This world, where what always matters is victory, success, winning, resorts primarily to the media, especially television, in order to show and reproduce itself. I remember here the golden years of Portuguese TV channel SIC. Surely the finest media illustration of Portuguese democracy, SIC was, for several years running, a true icon of "liberal imperialist capitalism", as a Marxist would have put, if Marxism had not died, excuse my irony.

Made up of market, competition, consensus, popular consultation, surveys, debates and communicational transparency, this channel was, until recently, an indefatigable churning of successful alternation and revision. It laid its hands on everything, from politics to religion and law, from public to private life and feelings, from suffering to death, in real and virtual time, in fictional time and in the fiction of all times.

The legitimacy of this world of total bartering lies in the fact of being a self-made entity, that continually reflects itself in all domains, following success-seeking strategies and even bringing about divergences, differences, disparities (which, however, must respect the rules of disagreement). This flat, immaterial world becomes increasingly more complex in its self-making. All this complexity allows it to control those energies that once, being "natural" or "human", were merely dissipative, pure waste. Someone said once that health was the silence of the organs. The system's health smothers all noises, that is to say, all subversion and alternatives. Given this, emotion and pleasure must follow the rules of transparency.

Back to SIC's golden years, let us look at the "All you need is love" reality show. Until a little time ago, love and passion, as natural, human feelings, could do nothing more to a man, if we want to consider an extreme instance, than lead him to blow his brains out, noisily confirming their wastefulness, by the way. Thinking in traditional terms, all energy consumed in pure loss is a waste. The "madwoman in the attic", as Descartes called the imagination, had to be held in the bear hug of reason.

But things have changed now. Love and passion are now useful, no longer wasted energy, having become part of the success strategy for the ratings war of a TV station.

In other words, as it happens with creation and belief, love and passion now also serve market and consensus, both of which, as I have already said, obey the law of debate and transparency.

In the latest local elections, I found a campaign poster that was the finest illustration of the above. A runner for the local council of Amares, a Braga municipality, used this amazing campaign slogan: "Friendship for all". Well, we all feel, indeed, friendship for animals, and only here such a hyperbolic generalisation can be legitimate, friendship here being just an expression, a token of tenderness. But friendship towards people, we all know it, is a rare gift, related to personal choice: we choose our friends, which makes them generally few. However, these Amares political posters already address a new reality, where feelings become the docile and useful instruments of pragmatic reason.

## **5. Towards a collective eroticism**

All attempts to capture the animal that lives inside every human being and all exorcisms to scare away the shadows that possess the individual and collective body are part of the regime of pragmatic reason, a reason fascinated by the abyss of success and haunted by the ghost of asepsis. The campaigns of zero tolerance and zero risk, together with the simulation of human adventure, through quiet incursions, facilitated by technology, the media and shopping centres, in the fantastic realm of evasion and exoticism, further and strengthen that process of impoverishment of human experience already diagnosed by Benjamin and Agamben. Our community, today, lacks a body inhabited by joyous eroticism. It lacks affections, passion, desire, feeling, effervescence, or jubilation.

As long as we call the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon "the 11 September events and their consequences", we are simply integrating terrorism in the traditional politico-historical scheme of our finalistic rationality, or irrationality. I believe that civic absenteeism, everyday sedition and terrorist escalation are all part of the same disastrous eroticism, a kind of allergic reaction of an impoverished and uprooted social body, given over to the abyss of total bartering in a flat, immaterial world. In different degrees, that go from mitigated to barbarous violence, we are always facing the phenomenon of Eros' temptation and possession by Thanatos.



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